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ABSTRACT

This address, delivered by the chancellor of Houston Community College System, considers the issue of meeting the challenges of leadership in changing times. There is lack of cohesion between faculty and administrators. Both groups must prepare students to live in a changing world, and make the necessary institutional transformations to do so. Community colleges have been accused of failing to adequately prepare their students for survival in modern society through archaic practices and inefficient policies. With the increased competition from proprietary schools over postsecondary education, colleges must employ innovation and flexibility. Suggestions for change include: (1) create a teaching/learning/working environment which fosters change; (2) re-examine the previously used collegial decision-making model; (3) recognize technology as the key for future change; (4) reorganize hierarchical structures so that they are more flexible; (5) move toward becoming pure "learning institutions"; (6) forge new and creative partnerships; and (7) redefine the definition of community to include the state, the nation, and the world. Citizens may act locally, but think globally, to fulfill the responsibility of preparing students for survival in a rapidly changing world. (YKH)

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Meeting the Challenges of Leadership in Changing Times

Ruth Burgos-Sasscer

Address to the Annual Conference of the Texas Community College Teachers Association
(Austin, TX, October 4, 1997)

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Meeting The Challenges of Leadership in Changing Times

Address delivered by Dr. Ruth Burgos-Sasscer, chancellor, Houston Community College System, at the annual conference of the Texas Community College Teachers Association. Austin, Texas, October 4, 1997.

Good afternoon.

Thank you for that generous introduction, One of the good things about being introduced is that you get to hear nice things about yourself while you are still alive and can enjoy them.

I am delighted to be here. It is good to see former colleagues from the Alamo Community College District and others from around the state whom I have come to know and appreciate. Most importantly, it is a joy to be among peers.

I started my career as a faculty member at one of the Community Colleges of the University of Puerto Rico. I taught in the departments of social science and humanities - chaired the combined department for several years. Although I enjoy working at the administrative level, I miss the daily contact with students and with other faculty.

At the university of Puerto Rico, where I began my career, you could not hold an administrtive position if you did not qualify for a tenured track teaching position. Furthermore, all administrators, except the president, had to teach one class a year. So I remained an active member of my department until I became president of the college.

When I moved back to the mainland - specifically to Chicago - I was not prepared for the dichotomy that existed between faculty and administrators. I

found myself working with other administrators who had never taught and with faculty who viewed administrators as "them."

I was never comfortable with this dichotomy and never really internalized it. In my mind, faculty - especially department chairs and faculty senate presidents - are as much members of the leadership team of any academic institution as are administrators.

As I was thinking about the topic I was asked to speak to you about today , I couldn't help but focus on three realities: that meeting the challenges of leadership in changing times is the responsibility of faculty as well as administrators; that the primary responsibility of both groups is to prepare students to live and work in a changing world; and that we must transform ourselves and our institutions if we are to fulfill that responsibility appropriately.

I believe we are living in exciting times and that we are preparing students for an exciting future. The challenges before us are great and at times may seem overwhelming, but if met with courage and wisdom, will lead us all toward a better tomorrow.

Last week President Clinton spoke at the central campus of San Jacinto Community College (near Houston) and praised community colleges because of their flexibility and accessibiliity. Then he added, "because they are always about change" and "therefore are the gateway to a new economy."

The president and other national leaders view community colleges as the key providers of a first class workforce and are increasingly calling attention to our important role in the future of our country.

The problem with all this attention is that now we must live up to the expectations that have been set for us. Our responsibilities as educational leaders are clearly spelled out.

Leadership has been defined as the ability to develop a vision that motivates others to move with a passion. The leader is the one who climbs the tallest tree, surveys the entire situation and yells "wrong jungle."

The equivalent to climbing that tree and surveying the jungle for us is to analyze the changes that are occuring and determining whether we are in the right jungle - i.e. whether we are responding appropriately. If we find that we are not, then we must quickly move on and motivate our colleagues to move on with us. If we can't or won't do this, our institutions and our students will be at risk.

What are the signs that we may be in the wrong jungle? That we may not be preparing our students appropriately for these changing times?

Numerous clues are given to us by legislators, employers, tax payers, and religious and community leaders. Listen to what they often say about us or our institutions:

- that our graduates cannot read at the level required for many jobs;

- that they cannot do simple math calculations;

- that they cannot think critically or shift gears easily - i.e. adapt to new ways of getting the job done or to changing conditions in the workplace.

- that our faculty have not changed their teaching methods or textbooks in years; that relatively few are using new technologies.

Imagine this: 100 years ago, H.G. Wells created a time machine. Three people take a ride on that time machine 100 years into the future to the year 1997: a doctor, a builder, and a teacher. They each go to a place where their profession is still practiced.

The doctor is absolutely bewildered by the new instsruments and techniques he finds in hospitals and laboratories. The builder is stunned by the power tools and new materials used by everyone in his line of business.

But the teacher feels right at home, like nothing much has changed. She sees the same looking rooms, smiliar desks, even some of the same books, big blackboard, so she walks right up to the front of the classroom, picks up a piece of chalk, and starts lecturing.

The critics of higher education also contend:

- that we are not addressing the special needs of the underserved populations in our communities and therefore not developing the full potential of all our people. This is a particularly serious indictment in communities were unemployment rates are dangerously high.

- that administsrators are not concerned with effeciency and cost effectiveness. Our institutions are top heavy and too bureacratic; too many layers of administrators so decisions cannot be made quickly.

- that higher education - as it now exists - is a poor investment of tax dollars.

There is an individual in Houston who calls me at least once a week to tell me all the things we are doing wrong with tax payers' money.

These criticisms must be taken seriously - especially in light of the fact that traditional colleges and universities are no longer the sole providers of postsecondary education. Yes - we have competitors - and they are growing by leaps and bounds. If we don't do the job right, they will do it for us.

New proprietary schools are emerging every day and their enrollment is increasing. Seven years ago, less than 500 coporations had educational/training programs for their employees. In 1997, over 1500 companies have such programs.

The CEO of one of a major company in Houston recently told me that his company is spending $400,000 in education and training next year. He added, however, that they would rather give us and other colleges and universities part of that money - but because they find that the quality of the workers they are employing is unsatisfactory, they have no choice but to go into the education/training business.

The skills they say are lacking are not the technical skills, but the so-called soft skills that are necessary to succeed in the workplace, e.g. effective oral and written communication; a good work ethic, and the ability to adjust to changing working conditions such as learning to use a new technology, adjusting to a new organizational structure, and a team approach to decision making.

The bottom line is that if traditional colleges and universities do not respond to the demands of our changing world and teach our students to do the same, our institutions may go the way of the dinasaurs.

I know there are many who don't believe this or don't want to believe it, but today's prophets tell us that if academic institutions are to survive, they must be transformed - just as business organizations are being transformed. And we are the ones who must do it.

Dr. Judith Eaton, president of the newly created Council of Higher Education Accreditation, recently wrote that "colleges and universities are in danger of losing their status as a public good if they don't commit to doing things differently and doing different things."

Dr. Richard Alfred from the University of Michigan, Consortium for Community College Development, insists that the survival of community colleges will depend on our willingness and ability to "move out of the box." He further believes that tweaking the system or applying the equivalent of bandaids will not do it. The changes must be radical.

Dr. John Rouche and his associates at the University of Texas Community College Leadership Program agree with Alfred and the others, but they add that institutions must also be willing to assess their performance and publish the results so that the public will know that the changes the institutions are making really make a difference.

Dr. Rouche and his colleagues call this "embracing the tiger" - the title of their latest book. It is not what we say, think or do - it is the outcomes of our changed behavior that will convince our critics that we are doing the right things.

Management guru, Tom Peters, believes that leaders of organizations that will survive in the 21st century must not only become agents of change but also "lovers of change.

There are some amongst us who believe that most of the changes that are occuring are the result of a pendulum swing and that many things will eventually revert to the "good old way" of doing things. Evidence indicates, however, that the changes occuring today are in a spiral soar - not a pendulum swing - and they will continue with increased momentum.

Bad news for those who resist change and good news for those who welcome it.I personally wish i were 20 years younger, because i find these changes exciting and would like to be around to see what else is in store for us.

The truth is that educators have always been change agents, but changes in education have occurred slowly so educators have had time to adjust to them or move out of the profession.

Did you know that in the middle ages, students were the ones who hired and fired the faculty?. Faculty saw to it that that arrangement did not last long..

Administrative and board structures evolved over a period of several hundred years. And the role of faculty has fluctuated over the years from minimum influence to a great deal of influence in administrative matters.

There have been gradual changes in teaching methods as well.

A few months ago someone sent me an article from the Association for Continuing Higher Education newsletter which contained the following hypothetical reactions from teachers at various stages in history.

1) from a math teachers convention in 1990: graphing calculators are a big mistake. Students will never learn to plot their own graphs.

2) from The Federal Teacher, 1950: ball point pens will be the ruin of education in our country. Students use these devices and then throw them away. The American vitures of thrift and frugality are being discarded. Businesses and banks will never allow such expensive luxuries.

3) from the PTA Gazette, 1941; students today depend upon these expensive fountain pens. They can no longer write with a straight pen and nib (not to mention shaprpening their own quills). We parents must not allow them to wallow in such luxury to the detriment of learning how to cope in the real business world, which is not so extravagant.

4) from the Rural American Teacher, 1929. Students today depend upon store-bought ink. They don't know how to make their own. When they run out of ink they will be unable to write until their next trip to the settlement. This is a sad commentary on modern education.

5) from the National Association of Teachers, 1907. Students today depend too much on ink. They don't know how to use a pen knife to sharpen a pencil. Pen and ink will never replace the pencil.

6. From the Principals Association, 1815. Students today depend upon paper too much. They don't know how to write on a slate without getting chalk dust all over themselves. They can't clean a slate properly. What will they do when they run out of paper?

7. From a teachers conference, 1703. Students today can't prepare bark to calculate their problems. They depend upon their slates which are more expensive. What will they do when their slate is dropped and it breaks? They will be unable to write.

These are fictional comments. I can't imagine teachers today reacting so negatively to current changes - can you?

At Houston Community College we adhere to that modern beautitude: blessed are those who are flexible for they shall not be bent out of shape.

The reality is that we cannot stop the world and get off - even if we wanted to. The unavoidable questions we must answer are: How do we exercise appropriate leadership in these changing times? How do we transform ourselves and our institutions?

Here are a few suggestions - gleaned from personal experience and from the experts. (I recognize that many educational leaders are already doing some of them).

1) Create a teaching/learning/working environment where change is expected.

it is important that we don't let anyone get comfortable with the status quo. Will Rogers once said: even if you're on the right track, you will get run over if you just sit there, We cannot afford to "just sit there."

This is easier for community colleges than for traditional colleges and universities. The latter are proud of the way they have operated in the past and struggle to maintain the status quó - in spite of declining enrollments and shrinking revenues.

A motto that the city of Houston adopted several years ago is "expect the unexpected." You see it written everywhere. It reminds Houstonians and visitors that this is a city that is responding to today's changing times. We should consider adopting a similar motto for our respective institutions.

2) We must re-examine the collegial decision-making model that has been used in higher education for years.

Although it has its merits, it is no longer useful. It is unproductive to spend time discussing the pros and cons of changes that are already occurring . We cannot afford to take the time to consult every group on campus before making a decision.

We must be prepared to make quick decisions based on the best information on hand. This means that as leaders we:

- must continually strive to keep abreast of the latest thinking in our fields and of what is going on in other insstitutions.;

- should attend professional meetings;

- should read as many articles on organizational change as we can;

- share as must information as we can with colleagues at all levels.

- should compare what we are doing with what others are doing - look for best practices and steal the best ideas. Tom Peters calls this "creative swaping."

3) We must recognize that technology is the primary driver of most of the changes that are occurring and will drive most of the changes in the future.

Regardless of the type or size or location of our institutions, .technology will change the way faculty teach and the way students learn; technology will never

completely replace traditional classroom instruction, but it will play a prominent role in the teaching/learning process.

Technology will increase the effeciency of our administrative services; it will eliminate the geographic and physical boundaries of our service areas and will expand our accessibility and outreach. Disabled students, working students, rural students - all will have access to the best teachers and take courses that previously were unavailable to them.

Faculty need to exercise strong leadership in the area of instructional technology. They must be involved in the quality control of the courses offered through the electronic media. They must provide guidelines for revising and evaluating curriculum and for evaluating student performance.

Given the astronomical amount of information that is available today and I the imited financial resources of most institutions, librarians (faculty) must join forces with other faculty to determine what kinds of materials and scholarly information should be made available elctronically.

4) We must reorganize our organizational structures so they are less bureacratic, less hiearchical, and more flexible.

Our traditional bureaucratic/hierarchical structures support turfism and an "us" and "them" mentality. They prevent "just in time" responses and limit creative thinking and behavior.

Not too long ago I received a call from a business leader complementing me because a secretary he had spoken to at one of our colleges had quickly responded to his request for information. I called the secretary to praise her for her performance and she informed me that unfortunately, her supervisor had balled her out for giving out information without his permission.

In our reorganization, we must give employees as much information as possible and empower them to use it appropriately.

The reorganized institutions will probably have a matrix rather than a hiearchical reporting structure. This means that individuals will report to more than one supervisor - depending on the nature of the task at hand.

Clearly defined departments within which individuals perform well-defined roles are a thing of the past. For example, the distinction between technical/terminal programs and academic/transfer programs is disappearing. The majority of students enrolled in technical programs eventually transfer to a university. So department chairs of technical programs now have to deal with the transfer function almost as often as do department chairs of academic programs. Department heads of technical programs may report to two different deans for different areas of responsibility.

Tom Peters says that successful institutions will involve everyone in everything.

Effective leaders do not have others working for them - but with them.

Not easy to change attitudes and behavior - so much of our bureacratic thinking and behavior is so entrenched - but change we must.

5) We must move toward becoming true "learning institutions."

Richard Alfred states that it is critical to "encourage and foster learning communities that can move the institution, as well as individual learners, beyond the limits of current capacity." We must consider ourselves as well as all our employees (and of course, our students) to be lifelong learners.

Dr. Terry O'Banion, executive director of the League for Innovation in the Community College, believes that the best way to do this is to convert our institutions into "learning colleges."

One can argue that we already are "learning institutions." But O'Banion contends that there are major differences between the traditional community college and the learning college he advocates.

For example, in the new learning college, faculty are viewed as facilitators or coaches rather than as instructors.

In the new learning college, students are viewed as partners in the learning process. They are offered numerous options and opportunities for learning. They are not all forced to fit into one mold. Some predict that less and less students will opt for an associate degree and an increasing number will go for customized training and transfer programs

In the new learning college a new golden rule applies: do unto others as they would have you do unto them. This new approach to student learning takes on greater significance as we strive to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

6) We must forge new and creative partnerships.

There is no way we can do it alone. In order to meet the challenges of these changing times, we must work collaboratively with other groups such as other educational institutions, business and industry, community organizations, religious groups and so forth.

7) Finally, we must redefine the definition of community.

We must expand the concept of community to include our state, the nation and the world. We may act locally, but we must think globally. There are very few businesses today that are not international in one way or another.

The other day, I received a call from a manager at Southwester Bell Corporation during which he informed me that they needed to hire 100 workers for newly created customer service positions and wondered if any of our graduating students would be interested. He added that these individuals must be bilingual - Spanish/English.

I assumed he wanted these workers for their expanded operations in Mexico and Central America. He informed me, however, that they needed them for local operations - to serve the growing immigrant Latin American population in Houston.

Let me add that we could not provide these workers because we do not have a foreign language "optional component" on many of our programs. You can rest assured that we will be doing that soon.

These are just a few of the ways we can meet the challenges of these changing times. New ideas are emerging - and being tried - every day. All of which should keep us on our toes.

To close, let me summarize what i have been trying to say during the last few minutes.

Our primary responsibility as educational leaders is to prepare our students to live and work in a rapidly changing world.

Traditional colleges and universities - including community colleges - are facing unprecedented and increasing competition from organizations that are geared to respond quickly and appropriately to the changing needs of business and industry.

The challenges before us are not trivial and the need to change outdated structures, attitudes and behaviors is imperative.

But because the stakes are high and the opportunities for innovative and creative responses are great, . I have no doubt that we will rise to the occasion and our institutions will not only survive but will thrive in the 21st century.

Thank you for inviting me to share my thoughts with you.